A Middle Path to Bring Back Truant Teens

Grossmont High School student Dafne Zurita used to have problems with truancy. Now, she's turned that all around. Above, she leads her English class in an exercise, using mneumonic devices to help them remember vocabulary words. Photo: Sam Hodgson

By EMILY ALPERT

Monday, Jan. 19, 2009 | As a freshman Dafne Zurita would lie to her mother and say school was canceled, then spend the day in her bedroom. She would leave El Cajon Valley High after a few classes and go to the mall alone or with friends. Her mother disapproved of the person she dated, and sometimes the frustration overwhelmed her and school felt too stressful to bear.

She was -- and is -- bright. But coming back seemed impossible the longer she skipped.

Twenty-six absences blotched her record by the end of that November and dozens more accumulated until last January.

"I thought, why even show up anymore?" Zurita said. "My teachers would be like, 'Why do you even bother?'"

The school tried to reel her back with an informal truancy hearing, but she kept skipping class. A counselor feared she was bound for probation or worse.

Instead, Zurita was picked for a new program that charts a middle path between probation and the school hearings that some teens flout. Schools are typically supposed to send students who have missed five or more days of school to a School Attendance Review Board, a meeting held by a group of educators and community workers to seek solutions to the problem outside the criminal justice system. If the student keeps skipping school, schools can refer them to the probation department to be charged and monitored as a truant. Some may even spend a few days in juvenile hall.

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The new effort underway in Grossmont and San Diego schools adds another step short of probation. It links students who have disregarded the softer touch of a school hearing to a probation officer who works with them informally, checking up on their attendance and chatting with them throughout the semester. It gives teens the impression of probation without the actual probation, keeping them out of court.

"There is a lot to be said for the badge," said Dave McDowell, a deputy probation officer employed by Grossmont schools.

The idea is to divert some teens from the court system so that judges can focus on the toughest cases. It carries no extra costs because the program is shouldered by probation officers who are already contracted by school districts at salaries ranging from roughly $93,000 to $111,000. And it has shown some early promise, with the majority of teen truants heading back to school and avoiding probation.

Zurita is one such case. Linked with McDowell and dropout prevention specialist Tammy Ullsperger, she got help smoothing out issues with her mother. School became "a breeze." Now a sophomore and an A student, she loves her English class and Greek mythology and says without hesitation that she will go to college.

McDowell has only limited powers over teens in the program. He cannot mandate drug testing or curfews, and he cautions that the program is inappropriate for students with severe drug problems or hardened attitudes. But the shock of seeing a real probation officer can turn some students who would otherwise keep dodging school. Another teen whose attendance improved, Santana High sophomore James Gibbons, said he returned to school because "someone is watching me."

Out of 22 teens McDowell supervised in Grossmont this semester, 17 have improved their attendance and are likely to avoid probation. Three students kept skipping school and will probably be sent to court. One moved. And one -- Zurita -- has already graduated from the program with flying colors. The same program is also underway in San Diego Unified, where 7 out of 12 teens significantly upped their attendance, one moved, one aged out of the program, and three were sent on to probation.

The program exemplifies the tight relationship between juvenile probation and many San Diego County school districts -- an unusual bond that is praised across the state. And it is

Diego County school districts -- an unusual bond that is praised across the state. And it is among the myriad efforts employed by Grossmont Union High School District, which now enjoys lower dropout rates than the county and the state.

Grossmont has one of only seven programs honored in California for steering kids away from truancy and dropouts. It employs dropout prevention counselors, gives away prizes for good attendance, and bankrolls McDowell to intervene with truants. And it is willing to take the next step and refer kids to probation, a step other regions neglect.

Truancy has gained more limelight in the decade since California forced schools to stop counting excused absences toward their funding. Most school districts are now funded based on their attendance, excused or not, and have replaced the scramble to get excuses with a scramble to get students at school, said David Kopperud, who oversees truancy issues for the California Department of Education. The recent pinch on school budgets has strengthened the push against truancy.

But truancy is poorly policed in many regions where schools fail to track it accurately. Districts report the data themselves and nobody audits the information. And unlike graduation rates or test scores, lousy truancy rates carry no consequences under No Child Left Behind. A national committee gave up on tracking truancy for the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools two years ago, complaining that "data on truancy are collected very differently not only between states but also within states and districts." Some schools rarely refer students to probation.

"The problem with a lot of probation departments is they say they don't have any time to deal with truancy," Kopperud said, and some schools may hold hearings so infrequently that they lose truant students as dropouts. Experts call Grossmont an unusual exception.

Probation packs serious consequences.

On a recent afternoon in a cramped San Diego courtroom decorated with motivational posters reading 'GOALS' and 'DARE TO DREAM,' Judge Browder Willis faced a quiet 13-year-old and his mother. He was the latest in a long afternoon of truancy cases to pass through the wooden doors: A girl who had the discipline to box but whose drug habit pulled her from classes. A boy who said he was only "pretending" to be a gang member. And there were scattered successes too, including an epileptic boy who boosted his grades after getting a curfew.

"I've been doing my work," the boy said simply.

Willis chuckled. "See how easy it is?"

But the hardest case was the quiet boy who had missed 74 days of school since his probation began. Deputy District Attorney Cindy-Jo Means said the boy and his mother had refused "every bit of help that has been extended to him" and missed a psychological evaluation. Juvenile hall might convince him that truancy was serious, Means said, and would give them a chance to figure out if psychological issues drove his truancy.

The mother was aghast, arguing that she had gotten no help. But Willis agreed with Means and sentenced the boy to five days in juvenile hall. As the bailiff handcuffed her son, the mother fled from the courtroom sobbing. After the commotion died down, Willis told the boy, "I am not going to stand by and lose you."

San Diego County is rare in detaining teens for truancy, even temporarily, according to both Willis and Kopperud. Though he cannot jail minors for "status offenses" such as truancy,

Willis can detain them for contempt of court for skipping school after the first hearing. It is used selectively and rarely for longer than a weekend at a time, a way to shake students who are unimpressed by a courtroom.

Detention is the most extreme push in the push-and-pull of truancy prevention, and other teens need a pull. Widely recognized as a symptom rather than a cause of school failure, truancy is spurred by a variety of issues and solved by anything from childcare to an exciting class to an alarm clock. It may worsen as teens feel more and more desperate, fearing they could never make up for lost time.

"It is not as simple as, 'I just don't like school,'" said Lucia Washburn, alternative education director in Grossmont. "It is more like, 'I've got a baby at home,' or 'My mom needs me to babysit' or 'My mom is gone at four in the morning and I don't get up on my own.' They dig themselves a hole."

McDowell is trying to pull junior Erick Uribe out of that hole and away from probation. He was still skipping school in early January when McDowell met him at El Cajon Valley to review his records. Some teachers are unaware that he is in their classes, Uribe admitted, and his mother denied him the family car. McDowell warned that "the game is kind of over" and court is looming.

"I didn't think it was going to happen so quick," Uribe said softly. "I just kinda didn't care after that -- but I realized that I can't not care."

Please contact Emily Alpert directly at emily.alpert@voiceofsandiego.org with your thoughts, ideas, personal stories or tips. Or set the tone of the debate with a letter to the editor.